
InTransition Episode 09 - Carmel McGregor

David: Well, hello ladies and gentlemen and welcome back to InTransition, the podcast that explores the practice of content marketing in government. My name's David Pembroke and I'm delighted that you've given up some of your valuable time to be with us today.

Content marketing is a strategic business process that involves the creation, curation and distribution of useful, relevant and consistent content designed to make the needs of a specific audience in order to achieve a desired citizen or stakeholder action.

That is the definition that we do run through each week and I think it's important just so that we know exactly what we're talking about is. Everyone comes to understand what content marketing is and how it can help government to explain its policies and programs to the citizens that elect them.

This week, our guest is the distinguished Australian public servant, recently retired public servant, I should say, Carmel McGregor and she joins me now. Carmel, hello!

Carmel: Hi, David. How are you going?

David: I'm very well, thank you. Carmel, rather than ne go through the Carmel McGregor story, the distinguished story and you've really had a great career, take us through it.

Carmel: Well, how long we got?

David: Plenty of time.

Carmel: Well, I've retired last year as you said. I've joined many years ago in Queensland, moved down to Canberra, been to political asylum at that time from Joh Peterson and I was in the employment department then.

Long story short, played around with labour market policies and programs, vocational education. Then, went along to Centrelink. I was one of the lead executives there which was at the creation of Centrelink, hardship posting in Paris shortly after that and worked at the OECD a little bit. And then came back and been to immigration after the organizational failure, united farmer and common reviews; went into sort of cultural transformation and client service stuff so I actually spent a lot of time around organizational design and HR, people staff.

And then I became the deputy public service commissioner and was working on the reform of Australian government administration blueprint and played around that for a little while. And then, did a review of the treatment of women in the Prince Department, the public service side of things that was alongside Liz Brodericks and "Skype scandal" reviews.

And when I finished that after offering great advice, they asked me to come over as the deputy secretary of people and implement some of my great advice. So, therefore few years later I had done quite enough and so I retired. So, I'm trying to work at what to do when I grow up.

David: What did you like about being a public servant?

Carmel: Every day is different challenges. I love being in the cup and thrust of things. I always chase the next big thing or I chase who I wanted to work for. I'm a psychologist by training. I'm interested in how people think and what makes them tick and public service is people business.

And so, people often scratch their head and say, "Why would you want to go and be deputy public service commissioner or run big HR team?" And essentially, it's about building the capability and I like that. I could see – I've been lucky in doing really pivotal policy work, welfare stuff, welfare to work, all that sort of stuff but it can only fall part if you don't have the right people capability behind it so that's the sort of explanation I guess.

David: And in terms of – that is a big rundown of a lot of projects. And as you say, you like to chase the next big thing. You're obviously very good at what you did or you wouldn't have got the opportunities. What role did communication play in your success?

Carmel: Well, absolutely vital, I think. I mean, I'm not a great orator but I sort of get the connection of what people need to understand. And so taken at from the background of the public servants, they need to be able to understand what's being asked of them. They need to be how to explain it to the public who worked with them. And then, they all have to be able to go and explain it to the citizens.

And so, when you're in frontline service it does becomes absolutely paramount and you have different techniques but you're right up against it. You can't get away from it. They are demanding of your explanations and you need to be able to explain it.

Then so, that's on level. Another, when you're actually coming up with great policies like they announced in the budget. You've then you got to be able to explain it to the population on behalf of the government.

David: And what are some of the principles that you follow in terms of the development of your communication skills and practice?

Carmel: Well, I guess not all would think probably the best experiences we had of communicating was in Centrelink under Sue Arden who was a pretty impressive CEO. She would implore us to walk in their shoes so there was a lot of understand what it means for them at what's it's all about. It's not about you, it's not about us, it's about the citizens or the customers as we would refer to them.

There would be a lot of techniques of actual listening. We would set up and this was hard wired into the business model where workshops where customers would come and sit around and the public servants couldn't speak, they had to listen and then they had to distill what they heard build it into the on-going work practices and communication plans.

That was probably the most – thinking back, that was revolutionary at that time. But also I suppose it was to take every opportunity particularly in a really dispersed organization where you got 300 sites around the country, you're touching every person's life basically across Australia or at least every family.

How do you get the message out there? Do you use people on the ground with emergence of changing technology and all that sort stuff? Use whatever you can, Centrelink had its own studio, you know?

David: Yeah, I remember that.

Carmel: All that sort of stuff. It probably still does.

David: Well, it's been very well established at being extremely good communicators for a long time. But what's your view about, more broadly across the Australian public service? It was hard wired in the Centrelink. Was it hard wired elsewhere?

Carmel: Well, I think when I went to Immigration and Andrew Metcalfe took over. He really sort of adopted much of that as well but really built a strong communications unit.

But also a lot of departments – when you get beaten up all of times, you become quite insular and you don't want to listen anymore because every time you listen you're getting bad news. That was really about pulling the ear muffs off and listening and getting out there with stakeholders.

A lot of that was face to face. A lot of it was bringing focus groups together, setting up stakeholder engagements, arrangements and strategies. That was getting in connections.

And of course, you're always afforded quite a bit of publicity per contrive over by the media but that's not necessarily what you want. And that becomes a vexed issue then because if you are getting beat up in the media, then how do you turn that story around?

I guess what I learned in a number of places is there is a real skill. There's an art to this and it's a profession. But then, when you think of have volatile the world is, you can't just rely on these professional two or three. You've got to empower others to try and get the message out.

When I go over – went to defence, I just think there's so much more that could be done there but it gets in such a big machine. It's not speedy. It's not agile and I think they're the ingredients that are really vital in this day and age.

So, whatever medium you use, it's got to out there quickly, respond quickly, get on the front foot of every important part of grabbing a story and telling them in your terms as opposed to reacting to someone else's often misguided interpretation of it.

David: But sometimes perhaps ministerial officers won't allow you to get on the front foot. Would that be insight?

Carmel: Yup. And I think that's become quite a phenomena in the last – it's a risk adverse culture. That's a grand statement but there's pockets of that. When you have a failure, the risk appetite diminishes and ministers do want to control the story.

I use to often say, ministers do good news and public servants do bad news and that's not unfair thing. I mean, they are the ones who get elected. They put themselves out there. Public servants are to deliver for them.

But it would be better to have a better pact, I suppose, of trust between the two that will allow ministers to say, "We're quite comfortable with you being the spokesperson on that." But you know I've seen places where you set up a capability and capacity and the ministers close it down and have it run out of their own office. So that strangles the message and it strangles the capacity to be far reaching and speedy.

David: Just on that issue of trust, what's your advice to people about building trust? Because really this, particularly for content marketing, there is a perception of risk if indeed the public service takes on the opportunity or the gift of technology which will allow them to explain and to go direct. But to do so they are going to need the support and indeed the encouragement of political officers. So how do they go about building that trust?

Carmel: Well, we're caught at it. This is at the end of the day it's a better relationship and it's understanding where that person is coming from, why do they have the perspective they have. Are you able to demonstrate to them that you can hear it? So, it really is about establishing a relationship.

I think when working hard at it, you'll get a rebuttal. You'll be called go away but you've just got to find another way and also sometimes the techniques you've used doesn't work, try something else. Maybe sometimes it's not your voice that they want to hear. Get someone to speak on your behalf, open the door. Keep at it and give them a win.

Get them to say something that they can find value in and that they benefit from. So I think it's a few little strategies around change management.

David: That's what you did a few times.

Carmel: I had a few go's at it. That's right.

David: Were you good at it?

Carmel: Well, it's for others to decide. I was very heartened, when I told you the best CEO I worked for, she told me I was great at it. She told me that I should be in religion. That I was able to convince people and negotiate in a way.

But I think the other thing is humour goes a long way. When you can make it light hearted and bring out someone else a sense of fun as well.

David: But it's no different is it really to any human relationships. It has the all of the components of building trust with anybody be it your local green grocer or your friend at a local church or whoever. Everyone's looking for that human connection.

Carmel: And don't they love to talk about themselves?

David: Yeah.

Carmel: As I said before, I'm intrinsically interested in how people think. So you can see a person's face change when you say to them, "What are you up to or what interests you and how did you get to be the way you are?" And so you learn something that they love talking about, you know? And love to talk about their kids and then you start to understand the person. That's what I learned from the trust thing.

David: You mentioned technology as well which is fascinating for me because technology is really disrupting every industry at the moment and I don't think government is any different. Perhaps they may perceive themselves to be different but they're not. So the changes are taking place in and around government and you mentioned you know defence being a big edifice, hard to move, hard to be edged off, hard to be able to adapt and adopt to different change. Are they going to have to?

Carmel: I don't think they do.

David: If they don't change, technology will change them.

Carmel: Well, you know all of the service chiefs have Twitter accounts. We haven't really encouraged too much Skype of late I don't think. But it is moving but it is slow.

And of course, you then also have people who are deployed on ships. They don't have much access to technology as others. But when you have a workforce that ranges that can be from blue collar to the top scientist in the country, kids out of school, seven to nine up to people who are aged 70, these young kids as you say, are going to demand it.

But I guess, in that environment there's always the sensitivity of secured information and secured networks and that will always be thus, I reckon. But where you're trying to actually connect with your workforce essentially, they are sort of using technology.

People deployed in Afghanistan can actually connect with families at home, not every five minutes but that would have been unheard of. It is changing. I don't think it's the go-to place to adapt what they do. But I think the fact that their workforce is so variable and essentially young, they'll have to be movement.

David: What about outside of defence and more broadly across the public service? You have seen your role in the institute of public administration so you still have your fingers on the pulse. What's your view on how well government is taking up this opportunity to or the public service in particular, taking up the opportunity to create and publish content and to go direct and to perhaps not involve the media as much as they need to? Because they can now do it themselves rather than go that way thru public officials or public relations they can build relationships directly.

Carmel: Well, I think it sounds very attractive, very necessary. I can really see how there would be benefits for the human services part of the world where they have a direct relationship with so many people. And similarly, the areas dealing with students and employees, a lot are really good messages are getting – not getting out there because this reliance on perhaps what is an old technology or old platform.

David: But just to move from there, but interestingly at a political level, there is this lament – particularly, well I suppose because we're here in Australia we were closer to it so we understand it. But there's discussion at the political level that our messages aren't getting out and we're not being understood or we're not explaining ourselves well enough at the political level. Why is it that we're not getting out the message as best as we possibly could?

Carmel: Look, I think this is sort of maybe a pretty tight interpretation of the roles. The other thing too, I'm trying to remember. You have sort of a code of conduct for dealing with information with everyone else. Then there was one which was developed a couple of years back of where the rules around social media.

But at the end of the day it's still information. It doesn't matter about the medium but that seemed to be the obsession that we are now dealing with social media. Had something different had to occur? But it's just about doing what's right so I think we get carried away.

But I think that probably does play – effective people are a bit frightened of dealing with the media and the fact that ministers, as we've talked before, sometimes constrain who can do it. And so you got to challenge that paradigm, I guess and sort of help them understand the benefits of different methodologies.

David: And this certainly is that opportunity and I think probably one of the other, well not so much of a challenge that it is opportunity but around skills and being able to have these skills to create content, to curate content, to distribute content. What's the best way to go about trying to improve these skills across the public service? And as you say probably not just to leave it solely in the hands of the communicators, the professionals but to disperse that responsibility more widely so that you have more people telling the story.

Carmel: Well you know I think what you're describing is breaking new ground. You're essentially sort of saying, "Here's the capability set that we want for public service." At this point in time, while we say something about in the selection criteria or

communicate with influence, what's that mean now? What do we want people to understand about it?

It would have to be built into job roles, built into learning and development. I do stuff out at Uni of Canberra and I was talking yesterday. They're developing a strategic communication workshop for some department. I'm not quite sure what that means. Hopefully, it embraces some stuff you're talking about. But I think they're trying to grapple with the issue that there is something here that has to be cracked.

And what has traditionally been dished up in leadership development programs or supervise wouldn't necessarily be anything along the lines of what you're talking about. So, it's a new capability.

David: If you were still involved in the public service and you saw this opportunity for the public service to be able to publish and to create, to distribute, to be influential, to use the various channels that are out there and to measure and evaluate their efforts, how would you go about trying to introduce the change so that content marketing becomes a central capability of the public service?

Carmel: Well, just as you're using the content capability as you explained, you got to explain it to people.

David: Hence, so I give the definition right in front of the program.

Carmel: Absolutely. But I think people almost have to see and touch something. You've got some case studies, you've got some successes and that's the most powerful thing to actually tell the story and people to see the difference it makes elsewhere how wonderful it could work for us.

And then of course, you would be able to try out a whole heap of matrix about reach and cost and lots of stuff and that will get the beans can over a line. I think it is a new phenomenon.

And also, it needs to be explained because when something new happens, people are fearful because they don't really understand it and they think, "I could mess up here." It's got to have the benefits. It's got the, "What's in it for me?"

It's got to be something that they can see it has broader application for themselves and they can see the successes. And they can see how to do it which goes back to your question about skill. It could be a bit overwhelming if I didn't fully grasp that this is essentially quite easy and will add to the capacity to deliver in their job.

David: Yeah, well I totally agree exactly that. I think it will be small steps as it takes hold because my firm belief is that this the way of future. Media business model is so challenged these days and the atmosphere is so fibril. They're trying to have a considerate conversation or dialogue thru a major organization out to the population is increasingly difficult.

That ability to try to do it yourself, to create useful relevant valuable content that answers the questions or meets the needs of a particular audience, I think it will happen. I'm looking forward to that as we take further steps towards that maturing.

And we have seen some real change. Anyone who listens to the podcast will know I'm a bit of a fan boy of what they've done in the UK because they had the benefit of the burning platform of the GFC where they had to make change. It wasn't sort of optional.

What's your views on where Australia is in that paradigm? Obviously there's challenges around, budgets and future resourcing, but how much of an impact or importance that might be in terms of adopting some of these more innovative business processes?

Carmel: It could be. We've got the burning platform. But whether or not it's been acknowledged that this is somehow a remedy for something, I don't know that's been as well prosecuted. It is interesting why the Brits come at some things and I think in terms of communication – I'm digressing a little bit from your question, but I've always been very impressed with their language. And we would think they are differently about the Brits in that sort of formal stride type of persona.

David: Stiff upper lip!

Carmel: But you know, when you and I had – okay, this sort of visits the cabinet office. I like their language and even select the body shot, the words. They call it for what it is. They don't dream up some bureaucratic term or whatever.

They clearly – it's something hard wired. From looking in, it seems as if by value how they explain content. Even their so-called nudge techniques. Well, you know what they're getting at just by the word not behavioural economics.

Even that small stuff tells a little bit about they must have something going on that says to tell a story to someone, "We've got to do it this way." So for me, it's not an unnatural consequence that they've got to that part but you're probably quite right. It was a burning platform that says, "We got to go this way." But I haven't heard the burning platform being explained as we got to go that way here around communications.

David: That's an interesting point you raised just about language and the importance of language, the importance of words, the importance of definition. It's one of the reasons why at the beginning of the program I like to define what we're talking about so people can sort of say, "I know I'm in the right place." Why aren't we as good as they are in terms of the use of language?

Carmel: I don't know. I don't know. You would have thought we would be. And I'm probably, we have known all the great story tellers but have valued that enough? Do we value that as a capability versus some other theory or policy pipe or whatever? But isn't it interesting that one of the best communicators of all time, Paul Keating was our

prime minister? And people remember things because of the imagery he could create. And I guess we've all known people like that and just I don't know.

David: It's an interesting, another interesting point that you raised though around the value of the communicator because what they did do as part of their reformed program in the UK was identify the communication as a profession within the public service. And so, therefore its status was confirmed and therefore taken more seriously.

Carmel: Yup. We're behind the 8-ball on that one. Across the public service we've known of Hank Jongen in human services as a professional. A lot of departments will be whoever's walking past the door suddenly becomes expert.

I used to have this conversation – we don't have enough regard for people who work in people area because everyone knows people so they can do that. And everyone has to communicate so anyone can do that. Well, you do it at your payroll don't you? You don't put someone who can't add up into a CFO job.

That's goes back to mindset of different set of roles. How do you raise the profession? I think this is an emerging one around continental communication that it does get the value and they are regarded as something that people need to learn and get good at.

David: And how do we go about it? How do we nudge it along so we get some...?

Carmel: Well, ministers get these sort of little success phases but it is about – you can then describe in ways of jobs. And then, those things have to actually be written up as such. They have actually be part of the capability framework along with the other dimensions we've put to it.

There's a knowledge aspect to it. There's a doing aspect to it. And there's being aspect to it. And so, building it into the way we learn, and the way we recruit and the way we advanced people. That's a whole big piece around workforce design. The public service commission needs to get all over this. Ready to go?

David: And take on that challenge.

Carmel: Yeah. Or the other, what I have known from being around the government for a while is it's often leveraging through the big places. The places that actually do have some capacity and reach and getting them to collaborate and then others collaborating with them.

David: As in the big department?

Carmel: Yeah.

David: They've got the grant to actually take on a task like that like in Australia.

Carmel: That's human services defence. But they're the big ones.

David: So what's next for Carmel McGregor? I know you're on the board of The Brumbies, the professional rugby union team here in Canberra Australia. Did you enjoy that?

Carmel: Yeah, it's good fun. Yeah, yeah and they're very fun bunch of men and they're great community asset and they will win this weekend and the one after that and the one after that.

David: And in terms of trying to work out, what's next for you? Where do you see those big challenges? Because I know there's a lot of listening now would be thinking, "Okay, this is interesting. She's got a great career in the public service, achieved a lot," but what's the itch that you want to scratch?

Carmel: I'm still deeply interested in public service. It's interesting to be able to look back in and I do a bit of work with places offering them, a lot of good advisory member that is so I'm happy to do that.

And I've also joined the AHRI Board, the human resource, Australian Human Resource Institute Board. That's again another extension of my interest in the profession of people-people.

Joined the Board of Common Ground which is the board here establishing a facility for homeless people which I'm standing on the shoulders of others who've done the heavy lifting but I'm very happy to be involved with it. And I'm doing a little bit of work here and there around women in leadership and that's an interest of mine and something I feel pretty passionate about.

It's just depends on who I get involved with to prosecute those things. And then, I want to do a little bit of travel here and there and freed up and all the rest of it. Go down to the Warden Library, setup a fake email account and write in and sort of reveal all to the Canberra Times or whoever else.

David: Well Carmel, thank you very much. Congratulations on your career by the way. Huge contribution to Australia over the years.

And thanks for coming in and having a conversation today about an emerging issue, an important issue and an issue that everyone is listening today is vitally interested in. So thanks again.

Carmel: Thank you.